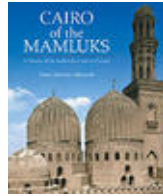


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Doris Behrens-Abouseif

***Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of the Architecture and Its Culture***

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Doris Behrens-Abouseif's book on Cairene Mamluk architecture has been eagerly anticipated. Well worth the wait, it is informed throughout by an encyclopedic knowledge of the sources, both from contemporary chronicles and *waqf* (endowment) documents, allied to a lifetime's acquaintance with the monuments and to art-historical expertise of the highest order.

The book is essentially divided into two parts: the first focuses on a variety of historical and art-historical topics; the second examines key buildings. The arrangement of topics in the first part allows Behrens-Abouseif to take a number of different approaches to Mamluk architecture. The first chapter lays out the historical framework. The second, third, and fourth discuss related matters, such as civil and pious patronage, and the motivation and perception of monumental patronage. These are greatly illuminated by her discussion of the effects of *waqf* on monuments and by her knowledge of their *waqfiyyas* (the deeds of endowment).

Behrens-Abouseif's comments (6) on the relatedness of the patronage of historical texts and architecture through the desire to perpetuate the patron's memory are extremely suggestive. We normally associate *waqf* with religious monuments, but she gives an example (11) where a fortress in Alexandria was endowed. Presumably this was justified on the grounds of preserving the integrity of the Dar al-Islam, although it seems to have been an exceptional case. Piety was the initial motivating factor in the sponsorship of architecture, but she also (12) brings out the tensions between *waqf*, *waqf ahli* (family endowment, in which the patron's family member benefited from revenue surplus to the needs of the religious institution), and the use, or misuse, of state land to support them.

She rightly points out (17) that Cairene monuments were linked with the founders' personal experiences, and not usually the wealth of the community or with victories. But it is doubtful that Qaytbay's funerary

mosque is, as has been suggested, an exception; Dina Montasser's work (in *Creswell Photographs Re-examined: New Perspectives on Islamic Architecture*, ed., Bernard O'Kane, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, in press) suggests that the use of the Surat al-Fath on this and many other Mamluk monuments instead was designed to celebrate the inauguration of religious foundations through the grace of God, seeking His blessing and reward in the afterlife.

Behrens-Abouseif (18) shows how the provision of crypts in mausoleums enabled their main stories to be provided with mihrabs and designated as oratories. This was a way to lessen the objection of some jurists to the building of mausoleums in the first place, as was, of course, their frequent incorporation in religious complexes.

The chapter on ceremonial is an illuminating account of how the city and monuments were the stage on which the sultans played the role of patron with the greatest of pomp. Fascinating details of social history are woven into the account. In one such instance, contrary to the multiple and frequently replaced wives and concubines of the sultans, Inal had one wife and no concubines—evidence of true love in the unlikeliest of contexts. It is also surprising to learn (32) that the people were more eager to have their legal cases examined by the courts of the emirs than by the qadis.

The luxurious fittings that went into the monuments are discussed in chapter 6, an important subject if one is to imagine the appearance of the monuments in their time. Behrens-Abouseif notes (35) the lack of royal patronage of illustrated manuscripts, especially surprising given their extensive production in the courts of the Mamluks' contemporaries. Her explanation, that it was a deliberate omission intended to cultivate their orthodoxy, is undoubtedly correct, and is also reflected in the transition from figural to epigraphic decoration in Mamluk metalware. She also gives glimpses from textual sources of the riches of tents, rock crystals, gold and silver vessels, and gem-encrusted silver and metal belts and saddles that have now all vanished. She shrewdly observes (40) that the decline in the quality of glassware precedes the usually given explanation, Timur's invasion of Syria in 1400, showing that Pierre de Lusignan of Cyprus's raid on Alexandria in 1365 may have been the real cause.

Chapter 7 includes new information on the relative cost of buildings and the ways in which they were financed. The information that the cost of an average mosque barely exceeded the monthly wage of the top emirs is indeed surprising, as is the fact that one of Qaytbay's tents cost more than a typical mosque. One small translation slip, however: at the mosque of

Sultan Hasan, it was the wooden scaffolding (rather than the mould) of the qibla iwan that cost 100,000 dirhams.

Chapter 8 discusses urban development under the Mamluks, including their building of new suburbs and transformation of the citadel, and the last two chapters deal with changes in style. I had not previously realized that by the fifteenth century the term *madrassa* had become not a description of function but one of form, describing a mosque built in the *qa'a* plan (76), an anomaly as unexpected as the use in certain *waqf* documents of the term *iwan* for the prayer hall on one side of a hypostyle plan. The topic of the priority of Cairo or Iran in the development of the double dome is addressed (83). Several points can be raised here. First, it might have been worth stressing that the swelling of the wooden domes (i.e., the qibla dome of Sarghatmish) was greater than the masonry ones (the funerary dome of Sarghatmish and the Sultaniyya twin domes). Second, as Christel Kessler has pointed out (*The Carved Masonry Comes of Medieval Cairo*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1976, 9–10), the internal ribbing of the Sultaniyya domes points to a brick (and more likely Iranian) prototype. Third, while Behrens-Abouseif understandably argues that the example cited by Michael Meinecke (*Die mamlukische Architektur in Ägypten und Syrien, 648/1250 bis 923/1517*, Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo, Islamische Reihe, Band 5, 2 vols., Glückstadt, 1992, 1: 127–28), the Jalayirid Mirjaniyya madrasa at Baghdad, barely has a bulbous profile, better examples might be the Muzaffarid tomb of Sultan Bakht Agha at Isfahan datable to 752/1351 (Lutfallah Hunarfar, *Ganjina-yi athar-i tarikh-i Isfahan*, Isfahan 1350/1971, 318), or a no longer extant dome from the first half of the fourteenth century, attributed to the Ilkhanid Sultan Abu Sa'id, also illustrated by Hunarfar (ibid., 295, although the drawing he reproduces is not, as cited, after Dieulafoy, but after Flandin). Behrens-Abouseif remarks (89) that the fifteenth-century portals display half-domes supported by trilobed vaults containing squinches, suggesting that it was an experimental field for the development of domes. It is true that Yashbak's domes for this period exhibit squinches, but almost all the others are surprisingly uniform, consisting of *muqarnas* pendentives. Perhaps the architects just wanted to show off their versatility.

The second section of the book discusses key buildings; here too essential information from the sources and *waqfiyyas* is conveyed in a concise manner that also frequently provides new information, and is combined with illuminating comparisons with other monuments. For instance, the information that the mosque of Baybars had three minarets is startling, as is the report of mosaics with trees on its qibla wall, a parallel with the

decoration of his mausoleum at Damascus.

In discussing the madrasa of al-Nasir Muhammad, Behrens-Abouseif mentions that its striking Gothic portal was brought from Acre by Katbugha. The complete story is more complicated, as Lobna Sherif has shown (*Layers of Meaning: An Interpretive Analysis of Three Early Mamluk Buildings*, PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1988, 87–90). In 1291 it was brought from Acre by the emir Alam al-Din Sanjar, but was immediately confiscated by emir Baydara, the viceroy. Baydara then assassinated the sultan, Khalil, but was himself assassinated by Khalil's emirs, having reigned as sultan for only three days. Finally, five years later, Katbugha took the portal from Baydara's heirs.

An example of Behrens-Abouseif's keen powers of observation is her notice of the hitherto unsuspected rams' heads on the exterior of the complex of Barquq (fig. 200). Similarly, with regard to plans, she suggests (192) that the reason why the mosque of Shaykhu does not conform to the usual symmetrical interior arrangement of arcades was that the extension of the qibla arcades enabled the mausoleum to have a window opening directly on to the main prayer area, an arrangement even more desirable than a mihrab in the same location. She is also not afraid to court controversy (146) with her redating of the stucco of the ribat of Mustafa Pasha to a redecoration of Janibak in the fifteenth century.

One of the heartening aspects of scholarship in Islamic art in recent decades is the increased activity in almost every aspect of the field. Two recently published works should now be added to her bibliography, Luitgard E. M. Mols's *Mamluk Metalwork Fittings in the Artistic and Architectural Context* (Delft: Eburon, 2006) and Abdallah Kahil's *The Sultan Hasan Complex in Cairo, 1357–1364: A Case Study in the Formation of Mamluk* (Beiruter Texte und Studien, 98, Beirut, Orient-Institut Beirut, 2008). In one of those unfortunate coincidences in scholarship, Behrens-Abouseif had just lectured on the similarities of the decoration of the complex of Sultan Hasan with contemporary manuscript illumination (the building's supervisor, Muhammad Ibn Biylik al-Muhsini, was also a calligrapher) just as Kahil was publishing his account of the same topic.

Behrens-Abouseif already has a considerable number of fine books to her credit, but this can be considered her magnum opus. For anyone needing information on Mamluk architecture in Egypt (for almost all of Mamluk architecture in Egypt is in fact in Cairo), this is now the obvious first reference.

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